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Appropriations Committee

March 1, 2023

Public Hearing on H.B. 6659 An Act Concerning the State Budget for the Biennium Ending June 30, 2025, and Making Appropriations Therefor.

Good afternoon, Senator Osten, Representative Walker, Senator Berthel, Representative Nuccio and members of the Appropriations Committee.

My name is Tanja Larsen and I represent Community Child Guidance Clinic in Manchester, CT. I am currently the Executive Vice President and have worked for our nonprofit over 20 years. We are a nonprofit agency that provides a range of mental health and special education services to children and adolescents throughout the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on H.B. 6659, the Governor's Budget. I am here to request that you increase funding for community nonprofits during the biennium by 9% in FY24 and 7% in FY25; and to index future increases to inflation. This funding is crucial to honoring your long-term plan to increase funding for community nonprofits, because it makes up for the high inflation nonprofits have experienced over the last two years.

I cannot express how grateful we were to receive support from the state and federal government. Since most of our programs operate on a fee for service basis, we relied on our workforce to show up to work every day to provide critically needed care to our clients and students. Without our employees, the programs cannot operate, and we cannot get paid. Like most of the country, we have been hit by a wave of turnover and increased demand in how we structure our jobs.

The last two years have been quite overwhelming due to the severe shortage of staff needed to serve children and families and increase in demand for mental health services in Connecticut. We had 40% of our workforce resign over this last year. Some of the essential positions such as a Special Education Teacher and homebased Clinician have been unfilled all school year. Creatively, we find ways to hire and retain employees while keeping up with the costs of health care. A salary survey completed by our human resources vendor indicated that we should increase most jobs 5%-10%, some as much as 20%. With the COLA increase provided last legislative session, we were able to increase salaries and offer retention and hiring bonuses. We were still left with an unbalanced budget with a six-figure loss on salaries alone. Health care premiums have increased about 9% annually. We cannot afford or even come close to what town and state employees offer their employees for health care coverage.

The emotional labor of the work we do should not be undervalued. Since the pandemic began, there have been headlines about the mental health crisis in our state and nationwide. There have been reports that emergency departments and hospitals are overburdened with very acute children and nowhere for them to go. Nonprofits like ours are the backbone to the mental health system and provide direct care to these children. Our outpatient department saw a 20% increase in the demand for services last fiscal year. Our programs that offer a more intense level of care had to build wait lists, sometimes

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three times their capacity. This means that children who need more intense services are often referred to lower levels of care, impacting the morale and resiliency of all the staff.

At this time, we run three programs that serve children who require intensive support. Staffing and programming for kids who struggling with intense behavioral and emotional challenges come at a cost. Low staff to child ratios are required to keep everyone safe and interventions effective. In our intensive outpatient program, interactive activities and food are necessary to aid the clinical care. Transportation, utilities, offices, group room space, maintenance, IT equipment, and supplies are all built into our budgets. Psychiatry is wrapped up into the intensive outpatient program rate. This has only seen a 4% increase since 2011. So, I remain confused that the Governor's budget proposes a reduction of \$16.5 million from out-of-home care, to reflect "utilization trends." How can utilization for out-of-home care be low enough for a reduction of this magnitude if there are waiting lists for services across the system?

Please invest in the nonprofits. Thank you for the opportunity to provide my perspective on the budget. Please support increasing funding for community nonprofits by 9% in FY24 and 7% in FY25, and to index future increases to inflation.



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